

TAPE INDEXNARRATOR Frank MedearisINTERVIEWER P. LotzPLACE Lk. Cachuma Park

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Interview with J. Frank Medearis
Date of Interview: September 25, 1985, Cachuma Lake Trailer
Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz Park
Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

PLT: Introduction

What is your background in the oil industry?

Mr. M: In the mid-30's we were doing some work in Bakersfield and one of the workers was talking with my uncle, Paul Medearis who originated our little corporation. This man said to my uncle, "Damn it Paul, why don't you fix up this mud for us?"

In those days the waste material called cuttings were coming down a long sloping ditch. These cutting were from the drilling fluid as you were digging a well. Rough-necks like me would have to get the shovels down the line to keep this ditch shoveled out all the time, which was quite a job. Uncle Paul told the man that he would give it some thought. He had a friend in Los Angeles that worked for the Link Belt Company, they were a famous engineering company that made all the heavy equipment for digging oil wells. Some of their products were mudshakers, coal mining shakers, great huge coil springs with a vibrator to separate the grades of coal. So Uncle Paul talked with this friend at the Link Belt Company and there were a whole bunch of these machines down there at their plant because they had not been selling this machine in recent years, as there was no coal mining in California

by then. Gold mining had also gone out. We took one of those machines out to Torrence, Cal. to our plant and started to tinker with it, to modify it for what we thought would work for the mud from the cuttings. We put pullies on it to test it. I was in Bakersfield at the time and told a man that this machine was going to be a mud screen when we got through with it and he said, "Good, I like the looks of it, even thought it doesn't work yet." I fixed up the machines and we shunted out the main trough and put it so the mud would go across our new machine. At first we had a coarse mesh, we didn't know what inch to use, this was a ten mesh and the mud went through it fine but it was vibrating too much so it was way out of order. We realized that the machine would work but we needed a finer screen, so all I needed to do was get the speed worked out. We had already decided on a three horse power motor because you have to have an enclosed explosion proof motor so I finally settled on a certain shive but that wasn't fast enough. These motors were 1750 RPM, 110 volts, 60 cycle, and I realized that the screen had to vibrate faster so I got a larger shive on the engine to 5 or 6 inches and reduced the shive to 4 inches and 2400 and that thing bussed just beautifully so we settled on that RPM.

PL: How long did this shake down process take?

Mr. M: Over a matter of a week or more with trips to L.A., in

other words the machine was designed for coal or gold and we had to develop a machine to work with small stuff. We did have a time with the mesh screen but we finally found one and they cost a fortune, a stainless steel one and we did work it out. The acid and other chemicals coming from the ground would deteriorate any other type of mesh screen.

PL: Did our company patent this machine?

Mr. M: The only patent we had was for the drive shaft, a fellow in the shop came up with the idea of a piece of steel 3 1/2 inches off center which made a complete vibrating unit clear across the field, just one piece of steel all in it's own housing to keep it out of the mud, and it all worked fine. We made a little shop there and it was one of our little secrets. We were the only ones in the country at that time but news spread like wild fire about this crazy machine and all the old timers recognized it for what it was, with modifications. By the time the other people caught on we were the only ones manufacturing this machine, and we had a corner on the screens for a long time.

PL: How did you father and uncle get into the oil business in the first place?

Mr. M: My Dad wasn't in the oil business at first. Paul Medearis, my uncle was a pioneer oil man in Oklahoma, he

was a rough-neck and tool dresser in the old days in Texas and Oklahoma. Like a lot of kids in those days, he worked for a living following the oil business where the work was, as I did many years later during the Depression.

When Uncle Paul came to California there was an oil boom at Signal Hill and he worked there and learned all the tricks of the trade at Signal Hill, Ca. Those were the days where in the dead of night oil drifters traded tools with each other. If you didn't have a certain tool, but your neighbor did, you borrowed it. They all had an agreement and they all got along. Later Paul was in Huntington Beach, and then went to Bakersfield, to the Kern Fields.

I came out to California from Texas in 1929, and went to Bakersfield and got a job as a rough-neck, then went to college for a year, majored in Geology and Science but I had to go back to work, when the Depression came, to make a living. Dad was still in Sherman Texas and my younger brother was still in highschool. I got to know the oil business by working with my uncle who had space in a large warehouse where vendors took space, rented space, 8 by 8 or so, where you showed your wares. Nothing was ever stolen from your space and if one of the superintendents needed a part from your station, they would take that part and leave a note saying so. There were 30 to 40 vendors in that warehouse and the place was open 24 hours a day. We had our first little supply house there, the beginnings

of the Medearis Supply Company. In the meantime we went to Southgate with a load of \$5,000 of second hand trucks, Southgate was our base. We delivered over the old Ridge Route to Bakersfield. So that was the beginning of our shaker business.

My Dad decided to come to California and my uncle had him working around the shop as he was a fine mechanic. Back to the shaker, we learned about an old generator, a Walker Turbine as we needed a better turbine, so we went to Mr. Walker and Dad bought one that we took to our shop and Dad changed the works around so he could get more power, then we took the generator to one of the oil rigs, hooked it up to the steam engine and the Walker Turbine just took off and worked the shaker just beautifully. Now we had another market for these oil rigs out in the boon docks and soon they were all over the San Joaquin Valley.

PL: If all these little outfits were working independently, who bought up their oil?

Mr. M: These were all contract deals, they had backing from investors, you see, the wild catters had backing of investors and those backers got 6% of what the wild catter got out of the ground. These investors were not just city slickers, they were oil men too and they could tell if a new well had potential.

PL: When the trucks came to pick up the oil from these small well, where did they take the oil?

MR. M: There was a Mohawk Refinery in Bakersfield, but a lot of those delivery trucks went over the Grapevine to Los Angeles. In the meantime there was a 22 inch pipe line just completed through Bakersfield in 1932. This pipe came from San Francisco. Right now the San Joaquin is honey-combed with pipe lines and only the oil people know where the are. But then the 22 incher came through and that eliminated the trucker. My family still has a little pumper down near Wilmington that we still get a bit of money from. That old well has been working for years and years. Arco took that over years ago. A fellow who owned that well found out it had sanded up and he didn't want to be bothered with it so my uncle took it over, put new liners in it, and it has worked for us for years.

PL: Did these inventions of your company, did they pay off?

Mr. M: Oh yes, the word got around and the field bosses came around to try our machines and they ordered from us for their own operations.

PL: How many people did your uncle employ?

Mr. M: 6 to 8. Later we had 15 or more after more orders came in. The big framework was already prewelded, so we only had to adapt the bottom tank to it in the shop. We would order screens by the dozens. When my uncle got touchy

about naming the product after our company, one worker said, "You have been around the fields so long your name means a lot to other workers, they respect your reputation." In addition to the other modifications, we made a little cat-walk around this huge machine so the workers could see how the cuttings were coming out. Those cuttings are washed under high pressure and they have to be washed clear.

PL: Explain what cuttings are?

Mr. M: The drill bit cuts the soil and pulls that out the top and you have to watch these cuttings, the soil comes up with water and sand. Our machine just evolved from a necessity. I sure would like to see what they are using now, this machine was so much more economical, buyers heard about it and came to buy.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

Every once in awhile we would get an emergency call and we had a young man at the office who took these calls, so I would have to go out and try to find the reason why the machine didn't work. Usually there was a foreign object in the steam line. Our shaker worked for some years and then others perfected a better one so it went the way of all things in progress.

PL: Tell me about these wild cat drillers?

Mr. M. They were very dedicated oil men, they worked out in the boon docks, and they could almost smell oil underground, Doheny was one. Then larger oil companies started to lease up whole sections at one time, like Kern County Land Company, in the mid-30's and in the 50's they bought leases even though the farmers were still farming, the mineral rights. Those wild-catters were a breed of their own. They might find a good well or they might not made a dime. A Mr. Giverson, a famous man in oil wrote a poem about those early day wild-catters that I still have. The title is, "The Oil Field Pioneers." That poem impressed me because at the time I was in Kettleman Hills near Colinga living in shanties or boarding houses because that was what is was all about. My dad was a natural genius with machines but had very little education as he had to work on the farm. Later on he had one or two patents himself. One that he perfected was a pipe wiper that cleaned off the pipe with water. Our company made the device and Dad got his cut from the sales.

PL: When did the rest of the family come to California?

Mr. M: In the mid-forties and they lived in Los Angeles. Our original base was at Southgate but I was out testing and delivering equipment all over the place.

PL: What became of the company?

Mr. M: It was started in the 1930's and in 1976 some people in Tulsa, Ok. called Geograph decided to to buy us out. I was having some health problems and so my brother and I decided to sell. The company was small but made us a nice little income and Geograph could fit our company right into theirs. Then I came here to Lake Cachuma.

PL: How did the oil industry come to Santa Barbara County?

Mr. M: It all started in Summerland, south of Santa Barbara, with the oil seeps in the beaches. Some years ago, after a big storm, some oil pipes became exploded that went out into the way and the newspaper people got very upset about those pipes but what they didn't know was that years ago those pipes were sealed and cemented over below ground. In the very early days those oil seeps were dug up and used to pave roads all over California. They would barrel the sludge up and take it some where to fix roads. Then they discovered that there was oil underground. Those wells that they had dug didn't produce anymore so had been cemented over. The wells went down only 2 to 3 hundred feet. In Texas and Louisiana oil is spotty and in huge domes where all of this is tracked by geologists. The geologists were working from the land but they decided to then work from barges in the water. These barges were the beginnings of the oil platforms that we see off the coast of Santa Barbara. They evolved from the small wooden barges of Texas. Those platforms are miles and miles out

to sea off the coast in the Gulf of Mexico. In the early days they took the barge and drilled a hole in the center to use for the drilling and then through the years perfected it to the platforms that you see, and I call them beautiful, they are a master of engineering. They are towed out there and placed in the exact position.

Back to our operation... we moved to Torrence where we had a much larger shop because we were assembling equipment for the Alaska Pipeline. We had two huge cranes to assemble the equipment. Everything had to fit on our lot and then it would be tested there for the owners. After testing all the parts were numbered and taken down to be shipped to a port and then on to Alaska. By the way, the original plan for the Alaska Pipeline was to go through Canada but President Nixon got mad at someone in Canada and stopped that route so it became much more expensive the way it was finally routed. They had one hell of a time coming down the final route but it was a master piece of engineering.

PL: There was a tragedy in the North Sea a few months ago, when a platform capsized in a storm, do you know what happened?

Mr. M: Those are floating English Platforms and they are huge but very trustworthy, so I don't know what happened but it had a lot to do with the weather. This platform was floating and because they are so huge they are stable and they have

anchors all around too. One of the legs broke off or sprung a leak, is my guess.

PL: Even though we now know of the huge oil reserves in California waters, why did the oil companies go to Saudi Arabia?

Mr. M: That was many years ago, the American Arabian Oil Co, Aramco, years ago made a deal with the Arabians and Aramco is a large combination of companies. That ancient sea is solid oil and so they had the pipe line laid there. OPEC has miles and miles of pipe lines laid out across the desert.

PL: Why is it that Ventura County can go along with the oil companies and receive revenues but Santa Barbara County is unwilling?

Mr. M: The environmentalists! That awful publicity that they generate. I call them Goo-maniacs. Ventura has always been an oil capital, we had a shop there at one time. Venture is sympathetic to the oil industry. The headquarters for the platforms is in the Shell Building in Ventura. That is where the platforms are monitored for all the production, the huge payroll goes to Ventura and management is there.

There are millions and millions of dollars in revenue that Santa Barbara could have too. But that money will never come because the environmentalists keep the pressure up

against the oil companies.

Take Long Beach, they bought the Queen Mary with oil money and installed her in the harbor, and are making money for the city. Signal Hill is a city within a city and they have lots of money. Those island off Long Beach are camouflaged with palm trees and the rigs are under mock buildings so it looks like a resort out there. Certain money has to go back to protecting the coastline and environment. Santa Barbara could have that money too but Old man Storke for one, was too narrow minded to allow the oil industry in and with his newspaper he could keep that money out. The state will get money from Exxon that is building a floating refinery in Japan right now, and Santa Barbara could have money too.

PL: You attended a meeting with Sec. of Interior Donald Hodel, what did you think of him?

Mr. M: I admired him greatly. I was introduced to him and he knew I was a pioneer in the oil industry and he asked me about things here and I told him. I knew then that the 15 year moratorium would not last. That was made under pressure in Washington D.C. by James Watt. It was to delay oil exploration for 15 years but that is ridiculous, Hodel listened to me. He was much better received in Venture than Santa Barbara. The 150 leases will be open for bidding soon and then there will be more platforms. We have to have more oil production in the United States.

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anchors all around too. One of the legs broke off or

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These platforms will come in to Federal waters and Santa Barbara can't do a thing about it.

PL: Thank you, Mr. Medearis for this interview